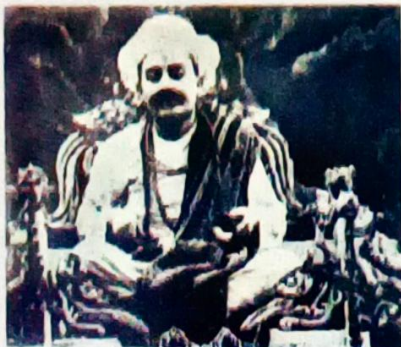


PATRIOTISM IN THE GUISE

Dadasaheb Phalke's unceremonious departure to Kashi brought the business of the Hindustan Film Company to a standstill. The responsibility of running the company fell on the shoulders of the managing partner V. S. Apte.



— *Hindustan Film Company's Tukaram (1920).*

Apte, like the other partners, was a textile magnate who knew nothing about the film business. However, he was determined to keep the production going till as long as he could. With the help of Phalke's assistants Gajanan Sane and V. S. Nirantar he somehow kept the company afloat and, more importantly, in production.

As many as 20 films were made during the three-year period (1919-1922) of Phalke's absence. It is difficult to ascertain which of the two directors directed which film since they are uncredited. Both Sane and Nirantar were stage actors who had joined Phalke's company in the same capacity. Nirantar returned to acting soon after this brief phase but Sane continued as a director with Pandurang Talegiri and even directed a talkie for Saraswati

Cinetone. Trained by Phalke he encountered the same problems as his mentor — he just could not keep up with the times.

This went on till 1922 when Phalke was coaxed to rejoin the company. However, the astute Apte had learned an important lesson to never depend on a single person, no matter how creative he was. Thus, in 1921, much before Phalke had rejoined, he prevailed upon his partners to float another subsidiary company in an attempt to hedge their risks. An invitation was extended to V. P. Divekar and A. P. Karandikar, former associates of S. N. Patankar, to set up a studio at Pune under the banner of Bharat Film Company.

In the very first year (1921) the company produced three films, viz., **Krishna Kumar**, **Tridandi Sanyas** and **Urvashi**. The next year production reached a high with five films, viz., **Draupadi Swayamwar**, **Radha Vilas**, **Sharmistha-Devayani**, **Venibandhan** and **Virat Parva**. By the third year the company was floundering and it valiantly produced two more films — **Krishnatula** and **Raja Gopichand** — before it folded up. Whether Patankar's erstwhile colleagues lacked business sense or whether the management just lost interest after Phalke's rejoining of Hindustan is not known. The Bharat Film Company may have been started as a counterpoint to Phalke but with 10 films in two years it did make an impact, even if it did not dare to explore new themes and was content to make only mythologicals.

But there were others who ventured

to experiment with new themes or at least explore genres other than the mythological. One among them was Narhar Damodar alias Nanasaheb Sarpotdar who made the genre of the historical film, at least during the silent era, his very own. Born on February 11, 1896 at Nandavalli in Ratnagiri district, Sarpotdar was brought up in Pune and Indore. He abandoned formal education to join the Maharashtra Natak Mandali and later Achyut Balwant Kolhatkar's repertory where he played female roles. He also showed a flair for writing and wrote at least three plays, namely, **Unad Pendhya**, **Chandrarao More** and **Bajiraocha Beta**.

It was Ganpatrao Joshi who recommended the fledgling actor and aspirant writer to Baburao Painter. Painter absorbed him in his Maharashtra Film Company in the dual capacity of storywriter and actor. He was also expected to coach new artistes. It was the year 1919 and the company had started just two years ago. Young Sarpotdar was a patient and diligent student. For three long years he does not seem to have played any billed roles but in 1922 he was at last rewarded with the lead role in **Damaji**. He also wrote the Marathi titles for films such as **Sairandhari**, **Vatsala Haran** and **Damaji**. For the five years that he was at the Maharashtra Film Company he observed Painter and absorbed the nuances of film direction from him.

In 1925 he was invited by Pandurang Talegiri of Deccan Pictures Corporation to direct **Prabhavati**. The film does not seem to have done exceptionally well and even the

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banner folded up soon after the release of the film because the partners parted ways amicably. But Sarpotdar did strike up a friendship with Talegiri. So, when Talegiri launched his United Pictures Syndicate at Kirkee in the same year he left to join him. The first film that Sarpotdar directed for the new company was based on his own play **Chandrarao More**, one of the early films to run into censor trouble because of its patriotic theme.

In the next two years (1925-26), Sarpotdar wrote and directed a record nine films for the new company before he left to form his own Aryan Film Company in 1927. Among the nine films that he directed were historicals like **Thoratanchi Kamla** and **Dha Cha Maa**, mythologicals and even a social **Dherni Chokri**, dealing with the plight of the untouchables. This was the first film to deal with a theme which was to later become dear to Mahatma Gandhi's heart and was highly praised by political personages such as Sarojini Naidu, Barrister Baptista and Shaikat Ali.

Sarpotdar directed one more film for an outside producer – **Vilasi Kanta**, – *N. D. Sarpotdar of Aryan film company*



about a flirtatious wife – for the Bombay-based Social Pictures. After this he started his own Aryan Film Company at Pune with the financial backing of Baburao Kanhere. His very first film under his own banner was **Arya Mahila** followed by **Udantappu** (both in 1927). For the next five years, till the beginning of the talkie era, Sarpotdar wrote, produced and directed all the films made under the Aryan banner which were a mix of mythologicals, historicals and socials.

With the arrival of the talkie era, the Aryan Film Company had to be closed down. Sarpotdar was among those who continued to make silent films for at least a year after the release of the first talkie. The last films under the Aryan banner were made in 1932, viz., **Bhawani Talwar** and **Sultana Chandbibi**. The first talkie film that Sarpotdar directed was for Maharashtra Cinetone for whom he made **Prithviraj Samyukta** (Hindi/1933). He then joined the Imperial Film Company in Bombay where he directed two Marathi – **Rukmini Haran** (1933) and **Devaki** (1934) – and a Hindi film **Chalta Purza** (1935). He tried to make a comeback in 1939 with R. G. Torney's Saraswati Cinetone's Marathi remake of their silent film **Bhagwa Zhenda** but wasn't successful.

Another significant director who was began his career in the silent era but who was destined to throw a long shadow on the early talkie period was Bhalji Pendharkar. Like his predecessors S. N. Patankar, Pandurang Talegiri and Nanasaheb Sarpotdar, Bhalji firmly believed that history repeated itself cyclically and

those who refused to learn from it were forced to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. He also looked upon the genre of the historical film as the ideal vehicle through which to express contemporary social messages and intensely nationalistic thoughts without inviting the wrath of the then British censors.

Actually Bhalji's nationalistic fervour began much before his film career, which was a happy combination of his two major loves – cinema and politics. Bhalchandra Gopal Pendharkar was born on May 3, 1898 in Kolhapur. His father was a noted surgeon attached to Shahu Maharaj, the Chhatrapati of Kolhapur. However, life at the royal court in the service of the King did not appeal to the restless lad. At the age of 18 he left his native Kolhapur to seek his fortune without even completing his matriculation.

He joined the army as a soldier and was posted in the North where he roamed all over Punjab and the surrounding areas. But Maharashtra beckoned him and he returned to Pune as the manager of the Laxmi and the Apollo theatres. His next job was with the 'Kesari', a firebrand nationalistic newspaper in Marathi founded and edited by Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Working for the 'Kesari' as a sub-editor, he was drawn to Tilak's brand of politics and hence the freedom struggle.

Soon Bhalji started his own printing press and, during his free time, began to edit 'Cinema Samachar', a periodical devoted to cinema. Simultaneously he began to research the life of Chhatrapati Shivaji who, he felt, had been unfairly treated by the historians. The idea at that time was to write an exhaustive book on the Maratha warrior-king and though the book never really took off (let alone reach completion), Bhalji's extensive and exhaustive research is reflected in the authenticity of his eight films which were to recreate the life and times of Shivaji.

While he researched, he took to writing plays to earn his livelihood.

These plays like **Asuri Laalsa**, **Raashtra Sansar** and **Kayade Bhang**, too, reflect his nationalistic leanings. Bhalji had a friend Baburao Patel, then a regular writer for 'Cinema Samachar' who later became a film-maker in his own right and editor of one of the most powerful film magazines of the 1930s and 1940s 'Film India'. Patel introduced Pendharkar to producer-director Manilal Joshi who had just started his own banner Ashoka Pictures in Gujarat and was on the lookout for a good story. Thus came about Bhalji's first screenplay which was eventually made as **Prithvi Vallabh** (1924).

Not even the presence of Fatma Begum and her two beautiful daughters Zubaida and Sultana could save **Prithvi Vallabh** which sank without a trace. It was neither a commercial success nor was it critically acclaimed. The ever-meticulous Bhalji was extremely dissatisfied with the way the script turned out on film. He vowed never to place himself in a similar position where his script could be mutilated. So, a year later in 1925, when the Sharda Film Company invited him to write their next film he staked his claim as director. **Bajirao Mastani**, narrating the true story of Bajirao Peshwa's ill-fated love for the beautiful courtesan Mastani. In spite of a practically unknown cast, the film gave Bhalji a decent start.

Bhalji's next film **Vandemataram Ashram** was made under the banner of Vandemataram Film Company formed in 1927 by Bhalji and his elder brother Baburao Pendharkar. Baburao had been in the employ of pioneer Baburao Painter's Maharashtra Film Company as actor and business manager. Starring the noted stage and screen actor-director Parshwanath Altekar opposite Yamunabai, the film launched a frontal attack on the British educational policies for inculcating a clerical mentality among young Indians. The film was submitted to the then British censors and was refused certification no less than five times. Instead of certifying this intensely patriotic film with an

obviously provocative title, the Censor Board suggested that the producers be prosecuted for anti-British activities.

By the time the film was awarded a certificate it had been totally destroyed and the brothers decided not to release the film. They shelved it, thus forcing the company to close down. The decision to close down the company was simple enough but it forced Bhalji to think afresh about his future. Temporarily, at least, Bhalji, like his brother Baburao, looked to the fledgling new institution Prabhat Film Company for which he wrote two scripts, viz., **Rani Saheba** (1930) and **Zoolum** (1931). Both were swashbuckling films in the popular mould, the first directed by V. Shantaram and the other directed by K. Dhaiber.

However, having tasted blood, Bhalji's heart was not in scriptwriting. He craved to direct a film of his own. So, when the dissident partners of the Maharashtra Film Company, after the departure of Baburao Painter, invited him to direct **Rani Roopmati** (alternatively titled **Love Immortal**) Bhalji jumped at the opportunity. The film starred the superstar of the silent era Sulochana alias Ruby Meyers and told the star-crossed tale of Baaz Bahadur's fatal fascination for Queen Roopmati. This was the last silent film Bhalji was to direct.

Another prominent director of that era, as we have noted earlier, was

— (l to r) **Dadasaheb Torney**, cameraman **S. D. Patil** (standing), **K. P. Bhawe**.



K. P. Bhawe. Born at the turn of the century in Karachi, Bhawe received his basic education at Poona. He entered the film industry as an assistant director, first with the Indian Film Manufacturing Company at Lonavala (in 1918) and later at the Maharashtra Film Company at Kolhapur (in 1919). He is said to have made his directorial debut in 1924 but the name of the film has been lost for posterity. His career, however, took off with Saraswati Cinetone's silent film **Bhagwa Zhenda** (1926), which he directed for veteran R. G. Torney.

Bhawe went on to helm more than 95 films in a career spanning almost three decades (1924-1953). During this prolific career he worked for, among others, the Sharda Film Company, the Imperial Film Company, Saraswati Cinetone, Jagtap Film Company and Shalini Cinetone. When the studio system collapsed, Bhawe continued as a freelance director and even after his retirement was much in demand to direct trick scenes. He made a few Marathi films in the early years of the talkies and a few in the 1950s, but none helped his career. He was always best known for his silent films. Probably Bhawe's greatest misfortune was that he was never inclined towards production and hence, never launched his own company. In an era where the producer had the upper hand over the director and cinematography was considered an essential part of cinema, this was the wrong thing to do.

But there were others who left the Maharashtra Film Company without making the error of judgement that Bhawe made. In fact, this group of four talented youngsters became the role model for everyone in the film industry during the talkie era. And the company they founded not only became the talk of the industry but actually dominated the film industry at least in the Western region. In fact, it dictated film-making styles for the next decade and more. The five partners of this new company were V. Shantaram, Vishnupant Damle, S. Fatehlal, Keshavrao Dhaiber and their financing partner Sitaram

Kulkarni. The company they founded was the Prabhat Film Company at Mangalwar Peth in Kolhapur. The date was June 1, 1929.

During the silent era itself the newly formed company made six films, viz.,



— Prabhat studios at Kolhapur.

Gopalkrishna (1929/V. Shantaram), **Khooni Khanjar** (1930/V. Shantaram), **Rani Saheba** (1930/V. Shantaram), **Udaykal** (1930/V.



— Prabhat's Khooni Khanjar (1930).



— V. Shantaram in Udaykal (1930) which ran into censor trouble.



— V. Shantaram.

the kind of films which were being made at that time. Though **Udaykal** garnered a certain notoriety because of its problems with the then Censor Board which saw in it an attempt to propagate the national movement. But that in itself was not too much of a diversion from the norm. There were several film-makers who prided themselves in being able to infuse a patriotic message in their films in the guise of history or mythology. Both Baburao Painter and Bhalji Pendharkar were doing it.

A few of these films were co-directed by Keshavrao Dhaiber, the seniormost of the Prabhat partners. He had also begun his film career with Maharashtra

Film Company. Born in 1890 at Kurukalli in Kolhapur, he joined the military service in Baroda state and later the excise department where he met and befriended Baburao Painter. It was, therefore, natural for him to join the Maharashtra Film Company where he concentrated on laboratory work and editing apart from playing a few roles. His first involvement in direction was as Shantaram's co-director for **Netaji Palkar**. Four years later he directed **Zoolum** for Prabhat and five years after that **Rajput Ramani**. Given the long gaps in his directorial career it was obvious that he did not take his directorial career very seriously. Besides, there was really no need to since Shantaram was already doing such a fine job.

The films that the new company made would have died without a

Shantaram). **Chandrasena** (1931/V. Shantaram) and **Zoolum** (1931/K. Dhaiber). None of them was exceptionally different from



— Keshavrao Dhaiber.

whimper had it not been for the fact that Prabhat (with two other film-making giants Bombay Talkies and New Theatres) was to dominate Indian film-making for the next decade or so. Its films — most of them bilingual — were to also have a lasting social impact and were to be considered milestones in the history of Indian cinema. But for the moment, during the fading years of the silent period, the new found company was content to tread along the oft beaten path of historicals and mythologicals.

Each of its films, however, had a highlight — like **Gopalkrishna** had a bullock cart race — which made the film very popular with the masses. This made the Prabhat product a little different from the normal rut of



— Shantaram at work before the talkie era was ushered in.

films being made then. The production values were naturally of a high standard. But more than that the films themselves gave evidence of a new directorial talent in the making — V. Shantaram — who, in the coming years, was going to prove his mettle as a film-maker.

Ironically, though films were being made all over the western coastline of India, none of these cities would end up as front-line production centres with the exception of Kolhapur. In later years Kolhapur would emerge as a major centre for Marathi films. This was thanks to the special interest shown by the Kolhapur royal family in launching film companies in the initial years of the talkie era. The three centres that would emerge as front-ranking centres were Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Already films were being made in these three centres and by equally significant film-makers. But more of that in the next issue.

— SANJIT NARWEKAR

